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ABSTRACT

Many counselors, psychologists and other growth specialists functioning in institutions seek ways of improving them but are frustrated by feelings of lack of personal influence or expertise. Attempts at change are often aborted or actually programmed for failure by professionals who expect rejection of their ideas. In many instances, professionals do not even try to initiate change because they are at a loss as to how to begin in their particular settings. This paper describes a model developed by a team of multi-disciplinary professionals which facilitates institutional change through training in group process, using Action Group Counseling (AGC). AGC is a teaching-learning model which integrates knowledge, skills and feelings in an intensive theme-centered group experience which involves subject content, personal feedback, practice, evaluation and reinforcement. (Author)

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Encouraging Institutional Change

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Many counselors, psychologists, and other growth specialists functioning in institutions seek ways of improving them. However, bureaucracies often tend to frustrate attempts at significant changes and to foster feelings of relative powerless among professionals. Some of this frustration and powerlessness is self imposed based on a feeling of lack of personal influence or know-how. Expecting failure or rejection, attempts at change are either aborted by the professional or actually programed for failure. Others do not even begin because they don't know what to do in their situations.

A Team of multi-disciplinary professionals at Queens College, City University of New York and The Relationship Development Center of Scarsdale, New York developed a model which facilitates institutional change through training in group process using Action Group Counseling as the teaching-learning experience.

Adaptations of counseling theory and method to institutional change assumes that conscious change begins with an individual. The professional is a person, not a role. When he sees himself as competent, creative, and powerful he is more likely to take constructive action than if sees himself as powerless. These feelings can be reinforced through counseling.

The following areas are among those that need to be recognized and dealt with in training those who would make changes.

A. The personal feelings, attitudes and sensitivities of those who would be change agents.

B. The knowledges and skills that need to be acquired.

C. The new channels of communication that have to be opened up.

D. The new perspectives that need to be discovered about the people and the situation where changes are being formulated.

E. The conversion of thinking about institutions and positions to thinking about people.

F. The development of an action plan for change.

G. The evaluation and refinement of the plan.

H. The implementation of the plan with the support, encouragement, and reinforcement of colleagues to overcome the emerging obstacles and frustrations.

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The system of Action Group Counseling is easily adaptable to accomplishing the above goals. It provides for the integration of feelings, knowledges, and skills that are required to produce action and change.

Definition of Action Group Counseling

Action group counseling is a teaching learning model which integrates knowledge, skills, and feelings in an intensive theme centered group experience which involves subject content, personal feedback, practice, evaluation, and reinforcement.

Motivation is seen as the key action. Until the individual translates what he has learned into constructive action, he has not learned it sufficiently. This is as important in counseling as it is in competency-based education programs.

Using motivation theory as the vehicle for action, the dynamic steps in counseling the individual are:

A. Help the person in an atmosphere of personal acceptance to recognize his goals and clarify them.

B. Help him become aware of himself and his own feelings, his affect on others, how he communicates, and the affect of others upon him.

C. Help him become aware of his own self-defeating behavior and attitudes.

D. Help him identify and practice new constructive behavior toward self-enhancing goals in the counseling situation and in other relevant life situations.

E. Help him by providing positive reinforcement and encouragement for constructive goal-directed behavior in counseling and in other life situations.

Summary of Sequence and Methodology in Action-Group Counseling

1. Themes:

Set a theme directly related to the group's purpose in being convened. The theme is subject to constant change and evolution in terms of emerging group needs and processes. Some sample themes: I a counselor; I a group leader; making it with others in this group; dealing with my fears of failure or inadequacy; dealing with my feelings of anger of loneliness or jealousy; catalyzing others to action; asserting myself; being able to listen and hear; understanding another person's behavior. Each person relates himself to the theme and the group goals to his own personal goals and needs.

2. Acceptance:

Give each person an opportunity to participate in his unique way and to be accepted as a person and as a group member.

3. Self-Awareness, Awareness of Others, and Feedback:

Sensitize each person through feedback to his own modes of communication; how he affects others and how they and the group process are affecting him- all in relation to the theme. Repetition of this process all through the group deliberations.

a. Identification of strengths and skills in communication; self-assertion; ability to help others; and competencies related to the theme that are already being practiced.

b. Identification of problems in communication and self-limitations such as: Inconsistencies, fears, perfectionism, jealousy, difficulties in relating. Identification of skills, knowledge and competencies that are lacking.

c. Identify personal needs involved in relating to others and ability to receive, give, take, help, and cooperate in one's own behalf and in behalf of another person.

d. Use new awareness to clarify relationships among goals, needs, and behavior.

4. Challenge and Confrontation:

Some confrontation of defenses and challenges to less effective behavior related to the problems identified and theme-competencies desired. The confrontations deal with immediate functioning at a level of present awareness and willingness to deal with them. The individual is not forced. Non-verbal techniques and imagery are often effective in this phase and in suggesting new directions for behavior.

5. Practice:

Practice the theme centered behavior. For example, members counsel one another for real - not role-playing - lead counseling groups among themselves, engage in role-playing, simulation exercises, imagery, games, group sculptures, and demonstrations. They receive constant feedback from the subjects of their efforts, from observers, and from audio and video-tape playbacks. They are also encouraged to recall their own behavior and evaluate it. One such method is to stop the ongoing action and provide for silent reflection before continuing so that the person is learning to correct or reinforce his own behavior while in process of counseling. The process would

be similar for other themes, but the experiences provided would be altered so that the needed behavior would be practiced. Members are encouraged to practice the new behaviors outside of the group. For counselor training purposes it is highly desirable that the members begin almost immediately to counsel with individuals and lead counseling groups outside of their own membership under close, immediate supervision.

6. Learning New Behavior:

Strong personal motivation to learn new ways of behaving is generated by all the foregoing. The energy is directed toward identification of new behavioral possibilities through experimentation, reading, questioning, observing and imitating others. The group leader or trainer becomes an important model for new behavior.

7. Learning Information:

Knowledge and information related to the theme arise out of the group experiences and are discussed. The group leader and group members serve as resource persons, members read pertinent literature, and seek additional information and resources outside of the group. Field visitations and demonstrations can also be effectively utilized. However, all information is related directly back to the self in terms of personal feelings, growth, competency, needs and goals.

8. Rap Groups to Improve Perception:

Rap groups are organized involving the members with representatives of the population that the theme-centered behaviors are most directed toward. It might be students with representative teachers or parents or prospective employers; counselors with members of the general public or students, or teachers or administrators. They are encouraged to communicate relative to the theme as persons rather than as helper and helped, authority and subordinate. In this way they discover how different groups of people other than their immediate peers feel and relate to the theme. With this new appreciation they can correct old perceptions and modes of behavior.

9. Evaluation and Integration:

It is necessary to cognitize the experiences by reflecting upon and discussing what has been happening and seeing how feelings, knowledge, skills, interpersonal relations, and group process fit together within the experiences. Each segment of group experience is evaluated- at least one or two such evaluations in a 1-2 hour session. An entire session is devoted to evaluating major portions of experiences which took several sessions. Another process is to request regular reaction papers which deal with all of the relevant experiences in a segment of time - say one week. The reactions attend to what I am experiencing and learning in relation to my growth and my goals in life. A third method is to evaluate through the use of research instruments such as personality scales or demonstrations of skills. A final evaluation session is conducted to integrate the entire experience and reinforce its continued application outside of the group.

10. Continued Encouragement and Feedback:

The leader and group members encourage and reinforce the continued practice of new, effective behavior and deepen the interpersonal relationships with increasing concern for one another and increasing helpfulness to one another.

11. Implementation of the Theme:

The group assists the individual in planning how the behavior can be used outside the group and encourages its use in other situations. These are reported in the group in many ways: oral and written descriptions, audio and video-tape recordings, observer reports, formal instruments to measure new behavior. The person recieves feedback on and reinforcement of his efforts.

12. Leadership:

The leader engages directly with the group members in all the above phases. He is a model of an increasingly mature, effective, sensitive, caring, and growing person. He is accepting of all group members, but is not timid about challenging and confronting an individual in the person's behalf or of challenging the group in its behalf. He deals with all of the emotions in the group including joy, frustration, anger, hostility, and helplessness. He helps to reinforce strengths, as well as to deal with weaknesses. He seeks feedback and challenges in behalf of his own growth and participates in self-evaluation related to the theme and his own behavior in the group.

The leader demonstrates many of the skills, knowledge, and behavior desired. He emphasizes here and now experiences. When something is brought into the group from outside, he can use role-playing, imagery, or seeing how that behavior is reproduced in the group itself to make it a here and now experience. He deals with digressions from the theme and resolves them before returning to the theme. He reacts to behavior rather than trying to interpret it. He suggests that each person speak for himself and not for another or in generalizations. He encourages relevant activities outside of the group, especially implementation of the theme.

13. Repetition:

The various steps in the sequence will occur almost simultaneously and in almost any order. However, the emphasis and major attention is placed on each step in the sequence suggested above. The steps are constantly repeated as the group evolves.

14. Follow-up:

After the group is terminated, it is desirable to reconvene after appropriate periods of time for single sessions - say every 3 months, 6 months, or annually. The purpose is to reinforce and refine the new, more effective behaviors and assist in their further implementation. Each person can reassess where he is and determine what further learnings he wishes to pursue.

The specific methods in the above system are drawn from various schools of group counseling such as Ego Psychology, Gestalt, Behavior Modification, sensitivity, Adlerian, and Theme Centered Interaction theories.

Counselor Training

The above system of Action-Group Counseling has been adopted as a teaching-learning model for the preparation and advanced training of counselors. It has been successfully used at Queens College in New York City, in a program sponsored by the Connecticut State Education Department, and in several workshops.

The purpose of all counseling is to help a person acquire new, more effective behavior. This is learning. Counseling is a teaching-learning process. Since it deals with the whole person and not only the acquisition of knowledge, it is a richer teaching-learning modality than the typical school curriculum provides. It generates a high degree of emotional intensity and hence a high degree of involvement or motivation in the process.

Learning theory teaches that people learn by imitation. If counselor trainers are counseling their trainees and modeling the other behaviors to be learned, these behaviors are likely to be imitated.

Learning theory teaches that learning is more likely to be applied the more closely the learning situation resembles the one the learning is to be applied in.

And learning theory holds that learning is acquired through eliciting behavior, rewarding it, practice, feedback, and further reinforcement.

We believe that using sensitivity techniques and other counseling methods in the context of principles of learning leads to greater skill as a counselor. The process of counseling effects important and durable changes in the attitudes and personalities of people involved.

We feel that the setting of evolving themes gives structure and direction to the activities. It is a means of integrating important cognitive data with inner feelings and goals and specific behavior skills. It also provides common purpose and stimulates cooperative endeavor rather than competition among trainees. They learn to value each other.

The learning experience is highly relevant to the learner because he is learning about himself in relation to the skills and knowledges desired.

We feel that engaging beginning trainees in counseling one another immediately and in counseling others both individually and in groups provides for immediate recognition of what has to be learned and immediate application of everything that is learned. This creates a high degree of motivation for learning.

We believe it is important to encourage the trainees to plan and immediately practice their new behaviors outside the group while the group continues its support and reinforcement.

The environment in which the training takes place should be similar to the environment that the counselor will structure on his job.

With the above ideas in mind, we have designed a number of counselor training programs, each different in terms of the training level of the participants and the specific objectives of the training. The model can also be used for in-service training by an institution or to teach any content in which interpersonal behavior is a central focus.

Training For Institutional Change

The goals relevant to institutional change are set as counseling themes and appropriate activities are designed for learning and implementing new behavior following the model described above.

Brief Outline of a Sample Workshop

The workshop is designed to enable professionals immediately to become engaged in a systems change process in their own institutions involving group work and group climate. The workshop is cooperatively designed with representatives of the communities involved to meet the needs expressed and specific selection and recruitment procedures devised.

1. Pre-session activities.

   A. Bibliography: read in specific sources to obtain a common base to cognitive knowledge.
   B. Think about self as an agent of change and as a group worker.
   C. Evaluate institution and formulate a plan for change involving group process.

   D. Assess own strengths and resources relative to implementing such a plan.
   E. Secure commitment to an institutional change process from the administrative leaders of the institutions involved.

2. Orientation session

   A. Introduction.
   B. Discussion of the program, how each person fits in, and the personal objectives of each member.
   C. Division into small groups based on similarities of needs.
   D. Collection of research data.

3. Intensive Week's Workshop

   A. Self-awareness session: 2 days, 20 hours, intensive group experience. Build group cohesion, develop self-awareness, effects on others, clarify goals, identify strengths and self-defeating behaviors, learn new ways of communicating: Among themes: "I as a leader and change agent."

   B. Supervised Practicum in group process
   Practice group leadership in small groups with immediate video-playbacks and feedback. In-put of Action Group Counseling theory and methods. Specific exercises to learn skills needed in particular types of group work for changes planned. Clarification of own behavior, needs, and goals relative to activities being learned.

C. Planning and Problems Seminar

Small group discussion of plans for institutional change and their refinement, "How I can be more effective in my job". Role playing implementation of plans.

D. Community Participation Session

Small group discussions using Action Counseling model with populations representative of the ones involved in the projected changes. Explore their perceptions of situation; the needs and goals they identify for themselves, and how they can communicate and cooperate with counselors to achieve those goals. Small group discussions to refine plans for change taking into account new perceptions derived from earlier discussions with sample populations.

E. Periodic Evaluation: After major activities each day, evaluate experience and integrate in terms of significance, knowledge, skills, feelings, and personal growth.

F. Concluding Integrative Session. Recap sensitivity experience to further extend personal awareness, integrate what has been learned into self reinforcement of new behavior. Evaluation of experience to date. Agenda for further implementation of the institutional change plan.

4. Supervision and Implementation - 8 weeks.

Weekly sessions to supervise and refine implementation of plans through feedback, evaluation, and reinforced continued discovery of new theory and methods applicable to the plans. Support and encouragement by group to each individual. Integration of experiences in the field in terms of own feelings and own growth. Key people and supervisors in the institutions meet periodically with the members so they are involved with the changes being implemented.

5. Follow-up Workshops

Training group meets twice per year for further refinement, reinforcement, and support. Group creates own steering committee to hold more frequent meetings as needed without training staff members.

6. Evaluation of total project

Self-satisfaction.
Formal measures of behavior change
Description of changes implemented.

The trainees are thus engaged in creating the desired changes in their institutions all through their training. They can use the model of Action Group Counseling in which they are being trained as the means for stimulating the changes. Each principle of the model applies. For example, every person in the institution has his own needs and goals and desires to feel accepted as a person in the institution. The plan for change should give each person such a feeling of acceptance. He should see that his needs, goals, and personal growth are taken into account and that he has influence in the program of change. In the same manner each principle of Action Counseling is important to the success of the changes sought and should be part of the plan and its implementation.

By relating to the people in an institutional group in this manner the frustration of trying to force innovations can be transformed into the joy of personal growth.